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STRAW.

WHEN Noble the King of beasts pardons the Fox in Caxton's *Reynart* (of 1481) he does so with a formality of very ancient origin ; primitive indeed, it would appear among mankind.

"The Kynge toke up a *straw* fro the ground, and pardoned and forgaf the Foxe all the mysdedes and trespaces of his father and of him also." But there is in Caxton's version (which was made direct from the Low German) an omission of much import. At least two centuries earlier the Old French *Roman de Renart* (line 11. 179) said he broke the straw and so pardoned them : "Il ront le festu si lor pardone." This grace was granted for a false consideration. The wily fox had held out to the covetous King the promise of revealing to him his father's pretended treasure "of the moste plente of silver and of golde;" and when he had received his pardon, and was thus "quyte of alle his enemies," he in his turn transferred the treasure to his leonine majesty in this wise : "Thenne toke the Fox up a *straw*, and profred it to the Kynge, and saide : 'My moste dere lord, plese it you to receyve hie the ryche tresoure whiche Kynge Ermeryk hadde, for I gyne it unto you *wyth a fre wylle*, and *knowleche it* openly.' The Kynge recceyuid the *straw*, and threwe it meryly fro him with a ioyous visage, and thanked moche the Foxe."

It is clear here that the form gone through — the taking up and the giving and the acceptance of the straw — was symbolic of the gift of something else ; that this form of act or deed accompanied the form of words long before writings were or could be employed, and that the picking up and holding out of the straw was a token of "free will" and was publicly made to "acknowledge openly" the gift conveyed, whether it were a pardon from the sovereign, or a proffer of service from a vassal. Note, too, that an old formula survived into our own days on signing and sealing a legal document, of saying, "I deliver this as my act and deed." Of course calling a written paper or parchment a "deed" or an "act" is absurd and unaccountable in itself, until the previous real act or deed is taken into consideration.

The fact that these straws were taken up from the ground indicates that the ground or floor of the audience hall was strewn with straw or rushes, in accordance with general custom.

We can detect a remnant of these straw-contracts in Anderson's "Cumberland Ballads," when a farm servant goes to hire himself out at Carlisle (locally Caryl, as Carlyle's name was pronounced Cairl at home) : "At Caryl I stuid wi a *strae* i my mouth." The straw

may have earlier been so carried to have it ready for the hiring-bargain; then it would have become a mere signal. Horses offered for sale have straw plaited into their manes. "She has a straw in her ear," which seems to have been said in some places of a widow on the lookout for "a better man" to mend her condition, and would indicate another way of carrying the Carlisle straw. The poor writer still puts his pen behind his ear or in his mouth as sordid habit wills it.

On the other hand, a bargain was cancelled by *breaking* a straw, — it broke the bond asunder, — as in the case of Reynart's pardon, and as in the French and Norman feudal usage generally, where to break a straw, *rompre le fétu* or *la paille*, was a mode of signifying as between suzerain and vassal the renunciation of mutual service. The vassal, for example, in such case, broke a straw publicly in his lord's presence when he took back his homage. This act is related of William the Norman, Count of Flanders, in an early Latin chronicle, the expression being "*exfestucare fidem*," to withdraw fealty by a straw; where *festuca*, the origin of the French *fétu*, meant "a stalk." Our expression "to break faith" with any one ought to have this custom for a starting-point. "For oaths are straws, men's faiths are wafer-cakes," says Ancient Pistol. In the "Romance of Alexander" (twelfth or thirteenth century) an Indian King Porus tells the conqueror to go home, for the straw is broken: "Va t'en en ta contree, rompus est li festus."

Molière used the metaphor correctly, but came to grief over the explanation of it in "Le Dépit Amoureux" (iv. 4). Gros-Neué says to Marinette, in their lovers' quarrel: —

Pour couper tout chemin à nous rapatrier,
Il faut rompre la paille. Une paille rompue
Rend, entre gens d'honneur, une affaire conclue.

The business, indeed, was concluded in one sense; it was *broken off*.¹

In the fourteenth novel of the "Heptaméron" is a metaphorical phrase which no one has explained, so far as I can discover. A dame wants to bar the way to an unwelcome suitor, and the figurative expression used is that she desired once for all to put the straw before him, and stop him: "Elle lui voulut soudain mettre la paille au devant et l'arrester." It really, as I believe, refers to what is now the widespread European custom of stopping a path to cattle, sheep grazers, or commoners by putting a stalk with a small wisp of straw dangling from its top. The correct old name of this bunch of straw was a *brandon* or brand, and it denoted in the ancient legal customs

¹ Might not the very expression "broken off" be a survival of this ancient custom?

of all the northern half of France a seizure or *arrest* — just the word used above — of the growing crop by the limbs of the law. It was also employed when the feudal lord seized, as of right, the heritage of a dead vassal: of course this term *brandon* for a wisp explains itself as having meant originally a wisp used for fire-kindling. Even the verb *brandonner* meant to seize (legally).

Long before, it was with this same *festuca*, stalk, or straw, that the Roman master or patronus touched the slave he desired to free on the head or cheek. Then he took him by the hand, turned him around himself,—an actual manumission,—and said, “I will this man to be free.” Here we must have something like the forerunner of the tipstaff; just as in the straw broken when renouncing vassalships, we may see the great chamberlain’s wand or staff broken on the death of a king — when he used to cry, “Le roi est mort; vive le roi!”

[To show that it has not been out of sight, let it be just mentioned here that the connection of the word and thing “stipulation” and the Latin *stipulor*, to bargain, with *stipula*, a stalk, and *stips*, a gift, has not been proven, although it looks such an absolute identity.]

Let us here just pose — but not answer — the question: how came a straw to be used for the plighting of troth, and consequently for its subsequent rupture? And then let us pass on to another branch of the subject.

I am fond of going to Japan for illustrations: its legends seem to be so steadily disregarded by most mythologians. There a straw-rope or *shime* is fastened across over the house-door or before houses and temples at the New Year, the belief being that nothing evil can pass such a slender barrier. It taboos a house to the spirit of sickness. The full name of this tie was the shime-nawa or shutting-rope, where the verb *shimu* means “to shut” and *nawu* “to twist.” There is a legend that one of the early gods, Susa-no-Wo, imparted the secret of a cholera-belt of twisted grass to a poor cottier in return for a night’s generous shelter. Such a rope or straw twist was, in an eclipse-of-the-sun myth, stretched across the mouth of the celestial cave, to shut off the sun-goddess from going any farther into the cave, and so being lost to the world forever. These most primitive of ropes are still religiously made of rice plants, plucked up root and all, and the roots consequently stick out from the twist here and there like tassels.

Such a rope is with great flower-festivities stretched every spring and autumn (February and October) from the top of the rocky precipice of the goddess Izana Mi at Kinomoto down to the trunk of a pine-tree below; and the same taboo ropes are quite commonly

stretched in a "magic" circle round sacred trees all over Japan. A very unexpected parallel to this is met with in the folk-lore of northern France, where L. de Baecker has collected the belief that "a tree tied round with a straw-rope will bear better fruit." In Dahomey they put around the house a coarse rope of grass, tasselled with big dead leaves, as a charm against fire. This notion of straw taboo seems to be at the root of the widespread legal French custom of brandons already mentioned. In archaic Rome a subordinate priest, the pontifex minor, at a certain part of the ceremonies of the holy sacrifice, when ordered by the Pontifex, made twisted ropes of straw (*stramen*). The name for these ropes, *napuræ*, was so extremely old that only one instance of it is (I believe) known in all Latinity, and that was taken by the grammarian Festus from what he called a Commentary on Sacred Matters. (It is a funny coincidence that the oldest form of the above Japanese word is *nap*.) Let us ask again, and again not wait for an answer: What can have been the source of the sacredness of straw in these customs? The facile answer that it was handy for twisting ropes with will not suffice.

The ropes in Japan are, so far as can be made certain, purely Japanese, but in a Buddhist temple there — the chief one of a wholly Japanese Buddhist sect — wisps of straw are sold at the gate to the devout, who dip them in water and brush the idol with them. It seems a native Japanese observance; the priests of the order are unable to explain it, and it is confined to the humblest classes. But so general and popular is it that the idol is always kept wet. At midnight on the fifteenth of the seventh month at the close of the festival of the dead, a number of substantial straw boats laden with offerings of food are launched from the head of the Nagasaki harbor, and the departed spirits are then supposed to be returning to their abode.

In County Down, near Belfast, boys go or used to go about on New Year's day with small twists of straw which they threw into houses and offered to passers-by, expecting something in return. In Aberdeenshire at Christmas they gather what is called "Yule Straw." Lightly twisted wisps of straw are burnt and flourished about at midsummer in some parts of France. And on some ancient pagan festival — probably one of spring purification or cleaning — lighted wisps of straw were carried about, in the dusk and dark of course. There was even a furious follow-my-leader kind of chase called the "danse des brandons" or wisp-dance, in which the people ran about the country on this and other feasts carrying these blazing wisps. This pagan festival at length got anchored to the first Sunday in Lent, still called in France *Brandon* Sunday. Here undoubtedly we have an acceptable explanation of the term will-o'-the-wisp.

The ancient sacred books of China, the *Li Ki* and *Chow Li*, record that in the time of Confucius, and before, straw dummies or lay figures of men were buried with the dead. These were substitutes for the terrible earlier practice—which obtained both in China and Japan—of burying retainers, servants, and concubines alive with the deceased ruler, Confucius, in order that they might become “followers of the dead.”

Witch-fires must have been lit with wisps of straw, and that is the only point that can be seen in what Prince Edward says of his own mother, Queen Margaret, in Henry VI. (Part III. ii. 2, 144):—

A wisp of straw were worth a thousand crowns,
To make this shameless callet know herself.

Nares said that such a wisp of straw was “applied as a mark of opprobrium” to a scold, and showing one to any woman was thus a grievous affront; but this gloss has n’t legs enough. It wants the crackling of the fire to set it going. “It smells of the fagot” is still the cheerful gibe applied to theology that is not quite orthodox.

It is a Japanese folk-custom for a slighted girl to make a rude straw image to represent her faithless young man, and nail it up to one of the sacred trees above mentioned, and so implore the help or vengeance of the local god who approves of these men of straw while condemning wooden dummies.

A closely similar practice to the early Chinese one is notorious enough as to ancient Rome. There, every month of May, human effigies made of rushes or straw were with great ceremonies by priests and priestesses thrown into the Tiber from the Sublician bridge. This was an undoubted commutation for previous human sacrifices carried out in the same manner. In Burgundy straw-man-ikins are still set fire to at the Carnival and thrown from a bridge into the river. The expression, “a man of straw,” common enough in French as “un homme de paille,” must come from these once sacred customs.

Cæsar, to whom the Roman imitations must have been familiar, wrote that the Gauls had immense images of osier-work in which they inclosed living men, and burnt them sacrificially. The biggest crimes and follies of men are religious. In Douai, until at least 1770, they promenaded a wicker giant in the month of June; and in Paris, down to 1789, they burnt a similar giant every third of July in the Rue aux Ours.

In Swabia, on the Moselle, in Lorraine, and in Poitou, wheels made of straw or else wrapped in straw were until recently burnt at the summer solstice. These wheels were either symbols of the revolution of the Universe, or of the Sun; and as to the straw, it is

easy to quote Shakespeare and say, "those that with haste will make a mighty fire begin it with weak straws."

The terrible freebooting incendiaries of the twelfth and neighboring centuries in France were called *paillers* from the wisps or bottles of straw, *paille*, they carried about on their horses, ready to set fire to the villages as they passed. The nickname taken by one of our own mob-leaders in Wat Tyler's rising of 1381, Jack Straw, had of course some similar ugly sanction. But this folk-name evidently had yet another signification, for an ordinance of Henry VIII. as late as 1517 regulating Christmas mumming laid it down "that Jack Straw and all his adherents should be henceforth utterly banisht, and no more be used in this house," upon pain to forfeit for every time £5, to be levied on every fellow happening to offend against this rule. This Jack Straw must have been a merry Christmas relative of the Jack-in-the-green of the merry month of May. We find him still all alive O! in this chorus:—

With my whim wham whaddle O!
Jack Straw straddle O!
Pretty boy bubble O!
Under a broom.

The merely fire-kindling explanation will not suffice for that wheel-burning. We want, and must get at some sacred, supreme sanction for all this. In the north of France (for another example), and in Belgium, the people announce a death by putting in the front of the house a cross trussed up of straw, and on the day of the funeral the church is littered with straw. Rushes were of course also used commonly in England for this purpose, as a quantity of local rush-lore still proves. In the common sayings, "Not worth a straw," and "I don't care a straw," the word rush is frequently heard instead of straw. Local vegetation always settles these questions without asking any; and straw, rushes, and osiers are sufficiently resemblant forms of sproutage turned too indifferently to industrial uses in beehive, chair, mat, bag, budget, and basket. In ancient Egypt, the roll of papyrus containing the Resurrection texts, which was coffined with each mummy, was tied with a simple straw cord.

When little Victor Hugo was four years old (1807) he travelled with his father in Italy, and they used to hang a cross made of straw out of the carriage-window, at sight of which the peasants would sign themselves with the cross. Littré, however, explains the vulgar saying, "*Croix de paille!*"—equivalent to our "Not if I know it"—by the illicit nature of a cross of straw. If this be so, it would imply that a pre-Christian use of the straw in pagan ritual had rendered straw impious for the purpose, and as for the Italian

instance, we know that the number of pagan superstitions that still live on among the folk there is unlimited.

But it is quite time to try and give some sort of answer to the question above posited as to the origin of all this sacredness and customary use of straw ; and to pick up at last the straw that shall serve to show us from what quarter the wind blew it. Else will the reader, and justly, view much of this as mere catching at straws.

The holy sacrificial grass of Vedic Indian times was used as a covering for the altar and altar-place, and its Sanskrit name, *barhis*, shows that it was pulled up by the roots — just as we have seen it in Japan — for the verb *barh* meant “to pull out.” The grass-plant used was generally the *Kusa* (*Poa cynosuroides*), but the name which prevailed ritualistically was “the plucked-up” *barhis*. It was upon this grass that the offerings were placed, and it was doubtless the forerunner of the linen altar-cloth. On it, too, in innumerable sacred hymns, the gods were supposed to descend and sit at the time of sacrifice. The *barhis* was deified ; and the word also came to be used for the sacrifice itself. Of course, this grass was or soon became dry, was straw in point of fact ; and now we begin to see how the sacredness of straw arose.

The *barhis*, having had its roots cut off, — which is a difference from the Japanese custom, — is spread on the altar or altar-place and sprinkled with ghee, that is, liquid butter. There was in the ancient sacred books a special priest told off for this duty, and called the *barhis*-trimmer. Even one single tuft or *darbha* of this grass — like the turf in a lark’s cage — is sufficient to form a homely little altar for the formal sacrifice or thank-offering at the devout Hindu’s meals. The grass is also strewn over the floor of the chamber where worship is put up, just as we saw the church strewn with straw at funerals in northern France.

But the imagery and symbolism must be carried much farther. The altar was so supremely holy and significant that in the Vedas and Brâhmanas it is not alone the essence and the omphalos of the Earth, but is taken symbolically to be as vast as the Earth, to be the Earth itself in fact. Of course it might be said, from the utilitarian point of view, that the grass was put on the altar and altar-place merely as kindling-stuff for the burnt sacrifice ; but I believe there is no authority for this view so far as Indian sacred literature shows. But there is another view. In the Vedas the Firegod Agni is said, when excited by the wind, to traverse the forests shearing the hairs of the earth. This Indian idea is also native Japanese, the word *he* meaning archaically and now, hair, fur, down, herbage, growing rice, and trees. It is a very natural physical parallel, cognate to another Vedic metaphor which calls the rain the dropping

perspiration of the storm gods. Thus, placing the grass on the altar, which (as above) stood for the Earth, completed its resemblance to that earth, and this seems to give us its *raison d'être*.

Thus it may be deduced that a straw from the altar would have been a holy thing to pledge an oath or word of fealty on ; and it has been shown elsewhere ("Night of the Gods") that in patriarchal times everywhere, the father of the family being also the priest, the central domestic hearth was an omphalos and an altar, and thus the holy straw could have been picked up readily in every house, which is in relatively very late times, and when all the religious sanction had gone out of it, what we have seen Reynart and the King both doing. The connection of pardon, too, with a divine source and a holy ceremony seems close enough, when we reflect upon all that is familiar as to the subject in religions that admit of sin-pardon. All the other ritualistic employments of straw seem to admit of an analogous tracing back to its altar-holiness.

It is to be hoped that this theory is not too straw-colored ; it is the best exposition of all the superstitions about straw which has offered itself in the course of a lengthened investigation, but doubtless there are many antiquarians who would disagree, and quarrel about a straw upon this (or any other) subject. If it be not of sufficient interest to induce some to spurn less enviously at straws in future, it is in any event better than passing time — and half crowns — at pulling straws out of a stack. Further this exponent saith not ; it is the last straw.

John O'Neill.

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